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Airtight missile watch

Foolproof verification — to make sure the Soviet Union is not cheating — must be built into any strategic arms limitation treaty the United States signs.

Many senators will refuse to vote for the SALT II treaty unless verification is made surer. Sen. John H. Glenn, D-O., and Sen. Howard H. Baker Jr., R-Tenn., the minority leader, are strong voices insisting on strict verifiability.

Just as the Carter administration is campaigning to win ratification in the Senate, while it puts finishing touches on the SALT II draft, verification has suddenly become more doubtful.

The United States lost some important electronic listening posts in Iran due to the revolution that overthrew the shah. It came to light Monday that CIA Director Stansfield Turner had said that it would take five years to replace U.S. missile monitoring capability lost there.

That would mean it would be 1984, when the SALT II treaty has nearly expired, before this country could make sure there was no violation of the treaty's missile provisions.

Carter people promptly came out with counterarguments. "Within a year we'll have regained the verification capability," said Defense Secretary Harold Brown. The United States has other forms of monitoring. And for the Soviet

Union to test a new missile would take 20 tests and "some years," he said.

In fact, Brown said: "I am convinced we are going to be able to verify a SALT agreement from the moment it is signed and ratified."

But this disagreement over verification has put Senate ratification in jeopardy. Glenn says: "Verification must be better defined . . . or we risk having this vital treaty disapproved or sent back to the president for further directed negotiation."

Glenn is leery of substitutes for the lost Iran monitoring stations. One of those, at Kabkan, was only 600 miles from the main Soviet missile test launching site. The satellites which are to monitor missile shots have not been built yet. Ground monitoring sites in other countries are iffy, as Iranian ones were. And U-2 spy planes have a dismally bad image in America.

Ratification of SALT II is a must-win issue for President Carter. Tripped by this verification snarl, the president will have to come back with a far more convincing sales argument.